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American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)
Proponent Testimony on Tennessee House Bill 291
Tennessee House Education Committee
March 10, 2026

Good afternoon, Chairman Lafferty and distinguished members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you in support of House Bill 291. My name is Michael Poliakoff, and I am the President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, or ACTA for short.

I will take a moment to explain my personal reasons for this testimony, beyond my role at ACTA. My roots are in academic life, and it is my passion to ensure that students have the best possible college education at the most reasonable cost to themselves and to taxpayers that inspires me. I founded and chaired the Department of Classics at Hillsdale College and have taught Latin, Greek, and Classical Civilization at Wellesley College, Georgetown University, and George Washington University, and still try to slip away from my job at ACTA to teach an evening course at George Mason University whenever possible. I have served as Pennsylvania deputy secretary of education, director of education programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities, and vice president for academic affairs and research at the University of Colorado.

For over 30 years, ACTA has worked to promote academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America’s colleges and universities. House Bill 291 would, in our estimation, be a significant step forward to ensure all students in Tennessee graduate with a strong foundational knowledge and understanding of how our government works and the history of how our principles and institutions of government developed. This legislation sets a reasonable and reliable floor for civic education at Tennessee’s public colleges and universities, ensuring that all students receive fundamental instruction in the principles of American democracy and the history of our great republic.

I would like to share several sobering statistics that highlight the absolute necessity of House Bill 291.

- As of this academic year of the public Tennessee Universities with an Arts and Sciences mission, only 3 have an undergraduate requirement for a course in U.S. history or government.¹
- A 2024 multiple-choice survey of college students conducted by College Pulse for ACTA revealed:

¹ <https://www.whatwillytheylearn.com/schools/compare?state=TN&schoolType=Public>

- Only one third of TN students surveyed could correctly identify the term lengths of Members of Congress.
- 87%, did not know that adoption of a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires ratification by three-fourths of the states.

And here is the devastating consequence of ignorance of the American story:

- 54% of respondents said they would rather flee the country than fight if Russia invaded the United States.

Our nation was founded on principles of liberty, equality, and the rule of law and our citizens need to understand those ideas that animate our civic life. Students should not be allowed to leave a taxpayer funded American public university ignorant of crucial concepts that include representative democracy, bicameralism, separation of powers, federalism, and constitutionalism.

HB 291 would require the study of the works that are fundamental to the history of American political thought, the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers, as well as writings by Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr, and select works that discuss the African American struggle for freedom.

These texts, these moments are essential for understanding American values and the quest for a more perfect union. It is especially important today because it shows students the true meaning of active citizenship—Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were ordinary citizens whose love and faith in their country inspired them to action in its name. Learning their story is preparation for American citizenship.

In 2024, ACTA convened The National Commission on American History and Civic Education, a group of 23 historians, political scientists, and education leaders. This group is about to issue a white paper on the civics crisis on American campuses. *A Broadside to the Nation, Preparing College Students for Informed Citizenship* examines how this crisis of ignorance unfolded on our campuses and offers remedies on how to fix it. One of the Commission's explicit recommendations is for state legislatures to pass legislation like House Bill 291.

House Bill 291 is nonpartisan and insists upon quite reasonable, but essential, standards for civic education in the State of Tennessee. South Carolina and Ohio have already passed similar bills, and other states are currently considering such legislation (North Carolina). HB 291 will put Tennessee in the vanguard of states taking up their duty to prepare informed, engaged citizens. It contains a provision that no other state has yet fully accomplished. That is to use the subject area brilliance of the new civic center, the Institute of American Civics, which this legislature brought into existence, to design the template that other Tennessee universities can employ to implement the new requirement for the study of the American story. Its director, Professor Joshua Dunn, is a key member of the National Commission on American History and Civic Education and is eminently well-prepared to help in the implementation of HB 291.

If I may, I would like to say a few words about the fiscal note. The South Carolina legislature allocated no special funding for the implementation of the REACH Act, which has now been successfully adopted at ten of the twelve state universities, and counting. Nor did the Ohio legislature for the implementation of the required American history course. When I teach as an adjunct at George Mason University in Virginia, I receive \$3,500 per semester for my Legacy of Greece and Rome course. The Tennessee General Assembly should not feel on the hook for the multi-million-dollar sums calculated in this fiscal note. Should the legislature wish to allocate special incentive funding for HB 291, universities would, of course, appreciate that extra help. But successful implementation of the new requirement does not depend

on a major infusion of new funding. And a final word: every public university in this state has programs that are undersubscribed and an array of classrooms that are underfilled. The absence of a foundational, required course on American history and government that would fill classrooms represents educational malfeasance and mismanagement. The universities themselves can rise to the challenge of fixing it.

I wish to thank Representative Ron Gant for sponsoring this very forward-thinking legislation, and I thank the Committee for the opportunity to speak before you today.